China's birth rate falls to lowest on record

UN predicts population could fall from around 1.4bn to 800m by 2100

BEIJING: China's birth rate plunged last year to its lowest level on record, official data showed on Monday, as its population shrank for a fourth straight year despite efforts to curb the decline.

It is now threatened with a demographic crisis after its birth rate halved over the past decade, despite the end of the restrictive "one-child" policy. There were just 7.92 million births recorded last year, Chinese officials said on Monday, a rate of 5.63 births per thousand people.

It was the lowest birth rate since National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) records began in 1949 — the year Communist leader Mao Zedong declared the founding of the People's Republic of China.

The United Nations has predicted that China's population could fall from around 1.4 billion today to 800 million by 2100, even though it has taken measures to boost fertility rates. Births fell by 1.62 million in 2025, a drop of 17 percent year-on-year, NBS data showed.

China's population also fell by 3.39 million people last year compared to 2024, extending the annual decline that began in 2022.

The government has scrambled to boost marriage and fertility rates, offering childcare subsidies and taxing condoms as it grapples with a rapidly ageing population.

China also recorded 11.31 million deaths in 2025, a mortality rate of 8.04 per thousand — leading to a population decline of 2.41 per thousand, NBS data showed.

High costs

Marriage rates are also at record low, with many young Chinese couples put off from having babies by high child-rearing costs and career concerns. Many couples born during China's family planning period — each only children — are now grappling with the responsibility of raising children while caring for two sets of ageing parents.

Authorities have attempted to address the flagging birth rate with a raft of measures intended to promote having children.

A nationwide childcare subsidy policy, which took effect on January 1, offers parents the equivalent of around $500 annually per child under the age of three. Authorities also waived fees for public kindergartens beginning last fall.

And consumers must now pay a 13pc value-added tax for contraception, including condoms, after Beijing removed exemptions from January 1.

Despite government efforts to reverse the trend, China ranked among the top 10 countries with the lowest birth rates in 2023, according to World Bank data, just after Japan. Young Chinese have largely shrugged off these measures, saying they are not enough to address the problem.—AFP

LISBON: Chega (Enough) party leader Andre Ventura celebrates on the night of Portugal's presidential election first round.—AFP

40 killed after two high-speed trains collide in Spain

ADAMUZ: At least 40 people died in southern Spain after a high-speed train derailed and collided with an oncoming one on Sunday night in one of the worst railway accidents in Europe in the past 80 years.

Twelve were in intensive care after the accident near Adamuz in the province of Cordoba, about 360 km (223 miles) south of Madrid, according to emergency services. Experts studying the crash site say a faulty rail joint may be key to determining the cause of the crash.

"The train tipped to one side... then everything went dark, and all I heard was screams," said Ana Garcia Aranda, 26, who was travelling back to Madrid and was being treated at a Red Cross centre in Adamuz. Limping and wrapped in a blanket, her face covered with plasters, she described how fellow passengers dragged her out of the train covered in blood.

Firefighters rescued her pregnant sister from the wreckage and an ambulance took them both to hospital.

There were people who were fine and others who were very, very badly injured. You had them right in front of you and you knew they were going to die, and you couldn't do anything, she said.

The collision occurred in a hilly, olive-growing region which could only be accessed by a single-track road, making it difficult for ambulances to enter and exit, Iigo Vila, national emergency director at the Spanish Red Cross, said.

Emergency teams were struggling to bring in heavy machinery that could lift the wreckage to get access to more of the dead, the Andalusia region's President Juan Manuel Moreno said.

PM cancels Davos trip

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez cancelled his trip to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, and Transport Minister Oscar Puente visited the crash site on Monday. Police drone footage showed how the trains came to a standstill 500 metres apart. One train's carriage was split in two, and the locomotive was crushed like a tin can.

Experts studying the crash site found a broken joint on the rails, which created a gap between the rail sections that widened as trains continued to travel on the track, according to a source briefed on initial investigations into the disaster. The technicians believe the faulty joint could prove important in identifying the precise cause of the accident, the source said.

Spain's Commission of Investigation of Rail Accidents (CIAF), which has been tasked with the overall investigation into the causes of the disaster, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.—Reuters

Far-right progress shakes Portugal's politics

LISBON: A far-right contender has reached the second round of Portugal's presidential election for the first time, unsettling mainstream parties and the right-wing minority government of Prime Minister Luis Montenegro.

Socialist candidate Antonio Jose Seguro topped the first-round ballot on Sunday and will now face off against the far-right's Andre Ventura, whom he outscored with a vote share of 31.1pc to 23.5, according to official near-complete results.

Leading newspaper *Publico* said on Monday the run-off on Feb 8 would be a battle between moderation and extremism. Although he failed to top the first-round standings in line with pre-vote opinion polls Ventura, of the far-right Chega (Enough) party, eased out liberal rival Joao Cotrim Figueiredo and government-endorsed candidate Luis Marques Mendes.

Cotrim came third with 16, while government favourite Mendes trailed in fifth place with just 11.3pc. This was the first time in four decades that a candidate had not won outright in the first-round ballot.

Pollsters predict Seguro will trounce Ventura in the run-off vote to succeed outgoing conservative president Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa. Sunday's outcome was nonetheless "another step forward for the electoral and political growth of the radical right", said Antonio Costa Pinto of the Institute of Social Sciences at the University of Lisbon.

"What matters now is what level of hegemony Ventura will achieve on the right, depending on his election results" in the run-off vote, Costa Pinto said. "That represents a major problem for a minority government which must negotiate with Andre Ventura in order to survive," he concluded.—AFP

Japan PM Takaichi calls snap election on Feb 8

TOKYO: Japan's Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi will call a national election on February 8 to seek voter backing for increased spending, tax cuts and a new security strategy that is expected to accelerate a defence build-up.

Takaichi plans to dissolve parliament on Friday ahead of the snap vote for all 465 seats in the lower house of parliament, in her first electoral test since becoming Japan's first female premier in October.

"I am staking my own political future as prime minister on this election," Takaichi told a press conference on Monday. "I want the public to judge directly whether they will entrust me with the management of the nation." She promised a two-year halt to a consumption tax of 8pc on food, adding that her spending plans would create jobs, boost household spending and increase other tax revenues.—Reuters

Astronomers spot mysterious 'iron bar' in Ring Nebula

WASHINGTON: The Ring Nebula, a stunning celestial structure residing in our neighborhood of the Milky Way galaxy, was discovered by French astronomer Charles Messier in 1779 and has been studied extensively ever since. But that does not mean we have it all figured out.

Researchers have spotted a large cloud of iron atoms in the shape of a bar stretching about 3.7 trillion miles (6 trillion km) long across the face of the nebula, which is a glowing shell of gas and dust expelled by a dying star, and are searching for an explanation.

They said it is possible the iron atoms, collectively comparable to the mass of Earth's molten iron core, are the remnants of a rocky planet that was vaporised when the star threw off its outer layers, though they cautioned that such an explanation is mere conjecture at the moment. The inner rocky planets of our solar system, potentially even Earth, could face the same fate when the sun goes through these same death throes billions of years from now.

The researchers made the observation using a new instrument called WEAVE, short for WHT Enhanced Area Velocity Explorer, on the William Herschel Telescope, located on the Atlantic Ocean island of La Palma in Spain's Canary Islands.

"It is exciting to see that even a very familiar object — much studied over many decades — can throw up a new surprise when observed in a new way," said astronomer Roger Wesson of Cardiff University in Wales and University College London, lead author of the research published in the journal Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society.

"It's a classic object for professional and amateur astronomers alike to observe," Wesson said. "Although it's too faint to see with the naked eye, it's quite easy to spot with binoculars. In a small telescope, you can see the ring-like appearance."

The Ring Nebula, also called Messier 57, is located about 2,600 light years from Earth in the constellation Lyra. A light-year is the distance light travels in a year, 5.9 trillion miles (9.5 trillion km). It is believed to have formed roughly 4,000 years ago, very recently in cosmic time. It is familiar even to beginning students of astronomy.

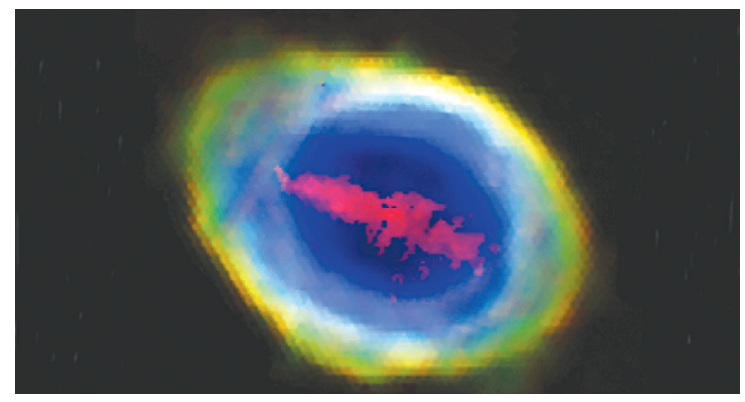
"You'll find it in many astronomy textbooks," University College London astronomer and study co-author Janet Drew said. That is why the iron bar is so intriguing.

"No other chemical element that we have detected seems to sit in this same bar. This is weird, frankly. Its importance lies in the simple fact that we have no ready explanation for it, yet," Drew said. "The origin of the iron might trace back to the vaporization of a planet. But there could be another way to make the feature that doesn't involve a planet." "A planet like the Earth would contain enough iron to form the bar, but how it would end up in a bar shape has no good explanation," Wesson said.

The nebula formed when a star about twice the sun's mass ran out of nuclear fuel in its core, swelled up into what is called a red giant and expelled its outer layers before becoming a compact stellar remnant known as a white dwarf, approximately the size of our planet.

"From the perspective of Earth, it has the appearance of a ring, although it's believed that it's actually more like a cylinder of material that we are seeing end-on. It's made up mostly of hydrogen and helium, with small quantities of heavier elements," Wesson said. About 3,000 such nebulas are known in our galaxy. Studying them lets astronomers examine the life stage of stars when chemical elements forged by nuclear processes inside them are released into interstellar space to be recycled and contribute to the next generation of stars and planets.

"We look forward to getting more data to follow up on this discovery, to try to unravel this new problem and work out where the iron bar has come from," Wesson said.—Reuters



A COMPOSITE image of Ring Nebula obtained by the William Herschel Telescope, located on the Atlantic Ocean island of La in Spain's Canary Islands.—Reuters

NEWSMAKERS

KYIV: Employees of Ukraine's energy company work to restore power supply for residents after an accident caused by overload amid extreme cold weather and recent Russian missile and drone strikes on civil infrastructure on Monday.—Reuters

ADDIS ABABA: An Orthodox priest splashes holy water on the face of a young worshipper near a pool at the end of ceremonial liturgy on Monday.—AFP

A MARINE life ranger stands near the closed signage of the North Steyne Beach on Monday.—AFP

Shark mauls surfer in Sydney, third attack in two days

SYDNEY: A shark mauled a surfer off an ocean beach in Sydney on Monday in the Australian city's third shark attack in two days, authorities said.

The surfer, believed to be in his 20s, was in a critical condition in hospital with serious leg injuries after the attack at a northern Sydney beach, police said. "The man was pulled from the water by members of the public who commenced first aid before the arrival of emergency services," New South Wales state police said in a statement.

All of Sydney's northern beaches were closed until further notice.

The attack at North Steyne Beach in the suburb of Manly came hours after a shark bit a large chunk out of a young surfer's board about 4 kilometres north along the coast at Dee Why Point.

That surfer, reportedly a boy aged about 11, was uninjured but the beach was closed immediately. On Sunday, a large shark bit a 12-year-old boy in the legs as he played with friends at a beach in Sydney harbour, leaving him fighting for survival in hospital. The boy and his friends were jumping from a six-metre (20-foot) rock into the water off Shark Beach in the eastern suburb of Vaucluse when the predator struck, police said.

"It was a horrendous scene at the time when police attended. We believe it was something like a bull shark that attacked the lower limbs of that boy," said Superintendent Joseph McNulty, New South Wales marine area police commander.

"That boy is fighting for his life now," he told reporters on Monday. Recent heavy rain had drained into the harbour, and authorities believed the combination of the brackish seawater and the children's splashing created a "perfect storm" for a shark attack, McNulty said.—AFP

GEESTHACHT (Germany): Numerous ice floes pile up on the Elbe river on Monday, forming a dense mass of ice. Following several days of freezing winter temperatures and a low water level, ground ice started to form and emerge to the surface.—AFP

DAVOS (Switzerland): The 'MonkeyRock' sculpture, an art-science installation by Atelier Van , at the 56th annual World Economic Forum meeting.—Reuters